

Deliverance from Death.

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S U B S T A N C E O F A D I S C O U R S E

Preached at KINGSWOOD,

Sunday, March 25, 1753.

By J O H N C E N N I C K.
Late of Reading, in Berkshire.

“ Jesus said, he that believeth on me hath everlasting life. This is the bread that cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die,” John vi. 47, 50. “ Lord, to whom shall we go, thou hast the words of eternal Life.” ver. 68. “ Jesus Christ hath abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light, through the gospel,” 2 Tim. i. 10.

T H E T H I R D E D I T I O N.

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JOHN viii. 51.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep my sayings, he shall never see death.”

THESE words of our Saviour, like many other of his sayings, are too lightly passed over, and not regarded, as being difficult to be understood, and appearing a sort of parable, although nothing concerns us more, or is more certain and true.

Whoever reads the holy scriptures must needs observe that many such places as this are found therein; and no doubt many, like the Jews, are offended with them, and serious people, who dare not reject any part of the oracles of God, and yet see daily the just and the unjust fall alike a prey to the grave, must wondering think, “How can this be?”

I will therefore, in this discourse, treat of this matter freely, and shew what properly death is; what it is to keep his sayings; and confirm this blessed doctrine out of the scriptures, “that whosoever keeps his word shall not taste of death;” or, as once he said to Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, at another time, “they shall never die.”

It is very certain that, in this place, by death is not meant the departure of the soul out of the

body, nor is it the language of the Holy Ghost, either in the Old or New-Testament, to call our leaving this world, death; but, on the contrary, it is generally said of such as die in faith among the patriarchs and prophets, "such an one was gathered to his people;" or, "Slept with his fathers;" or, "gave up the ghost:" So Daniel saith, "they that sleep in the dust:" and very seldom it is said they died, unless spoken of unbelievers, or such as were not people of God; and herein the nice divinity of the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls is to be observed in the New-Testament, for speaking of the decease of Lazarus, to his disciples, he saith, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth;" and only on account of the weakness of his followers, who did not understand him, he said, "He is dead." After the same manner he said in the house of the ruler, when the mourners were lamenting over a departed child, "Give place, she is not dead, but sleepeth," Matt. ix. 24. Thus the Lord would have us look upon the natural change which good and bad experience. The apostles followed our Saviour in this way of speaking, and so wrote of Stephen, "That he fell asleep." And St. Paul calls such as were departed in Christ, persons "who sleep in Jesus," 1 Thess. iv. 14. But what properly then is death? When God had blessed Adam and Eve in paradise, he forewarned them not to eat of one tree, saying, "In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die;" and this undoubtedly came to pass, according to the word of the Lord; for though Adam lived some hundred years after he had eaten the forbidden fruit, yet that same day, in which he sinned, the life which God breathed into his heart, when he became a living soul, departing from

from him, and he became dead to God while he lived. Thus death entered the world temporal and spiritual; and in this sense it is said, "In Adam all died," i. e. all were robbed of divine life, and lost that which is the image of God, and which is only recovered by faith in Christ, who came to be a quickning spirit, and to give life to the world.

I know that some think the death threatened to Adam, was only temporal, and that his sin only rendered him subject to die, or made him mortal; and that because a thousand years are, with the Lord, as one day; so it might, in a certain sense, be said, he died that day he sinned, because he died before he had seen a thousand years; but this sense is far too shallow, and serves only to please such as would not willingly allow of all becoming sinners, and dying spiritually in Adam. Which is a doctrine most surely true, and according to the scriptures. I cannot look upon temporal death as a curse, or that we suffer any thing through God's ordering the cherubim to guard the tree of life, that Adam might not eat of it, and live for ever; but I think it was the tender mercy of our Saviour, who, after sin had entered, and death and hell followed, designed we should not live for ever in that fallen state, but let our poor bodies return again to dust, from whence they were formed, and rest there till he should create all things new, in which day they might rise again in likeness of his glorious body. And thus if a man, by mischance, had let some goodly grain, such as wheat or barley, fall into some nasty ditch, or dirty place, so that it was no longer fit for use; his best way would be to sow it, and he would nevertheless lose nothing by it, but

but get a good harvest out of it. Even so the good Husbandman does with our mortal and vile bodies : He sows us in likeness of his death, that we may be raised in likeness of his resurrection. And, indeed, one can easily see that temporal death is now of no harm to us ; for how miserable would our lives be, after we had passed some hundred years, and were sickly, infirm, and a burden to ourselves and all round about us ? It is better, as I said before, that we can lay down our poor spoiled tabernacles, and rest till the Lord comes : And this must be looked upon in no other light, if we believe, than that the weary pilgrim has laid by his staff and accomplished his warfare in a good age, and is now resting in the same bed, in the same earth, from whence they were born, and where once their dear Lord lay. A believer cannot have such ideas of the grave as those under the law had ; for we cannot dread it as a pit, or a prison, but as our beds, out of which we surely awake, and sing, " O grave ! where is thy victory ? "

But this is not an easy matter to a person unconverted, I mean one who was never quickened by Jesus Christ, or ever knew what it meant, to get eternal life by believing in his name. These are dead indeed ; And however far they have advanced in the form of godliness, and can make their boast how well they have lived, how little evil they have done, how much they have served God, and are educated and brought up in the best church, yet God shall say of such, " I know thy works ; thou hast a name to live, but thou art dead." A man departing this life, loaded with the sins of his youth, a soul taking its flight into eternity, who does not know the Saviour, who has

never received its pardon, who does not know its name is written in heaven, but has madly gone on in the world, and slighted the precious blood and merits of Jesus Christ, or foolishly contented itself with being strictly honest, and having lived a moral life in the sight of men, such a one can taste of death, such a one can feel horrors and distress unspeakable; and when the death-sweat is upon them, when their limbs are growing cold and benumbed, and the eye-strings breaking, and no friend can comfort them more; when they must go, and feel they are without Christ and his righteousness, and are now not worthy to be with him, O such die, such feel the pangs of death, the sting of the king of terrors, through the fear of which all the world have been subject to bondage. Every man by nature lies in this death, and is not sensible of it till awakened by the voice of the Son of man, till the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the gospel, awakes those who sleep, and leads them to Jesus Christ, who can alone give them life; or as himself expresses it, "The dead shall hear the voice of the Son of Man, and they that hear shall live." And this is not spoken of the last or general resurrection, but of a work wrought in the heart in this world; because he saith, in the same place, "The hour is coming, and now is, when this shall be done." At the sepulchre of Lazarus he preaches thus, "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me shall live, though he were dead." And again the scripture saith, "Blessed are those who have a part in this resurrection, the second death shall have no power over them. They shall never die." But let a man venture into eternity carelessly, and experience nothing of this; let a soul dare go to another world, depending on his own

own righteousness, or die without having in the heart the witness of God's Spirit, with his spirit, that he is a child of God, or without feeling and knowing that our Saviour has given him life; and such an one shall find there is somewhat true in our having died in Adam; and forasmuch as he did not come to our Saviour, that he might live, he shall not save his soul alive; he shall die, he shall see death, and tremble, do what he will. Do not then put these things far from thee: Do not say, as Felix did once to Paul, when his doctrine made him shudder and quake, "Go thy way, for this time, when I have a convenient season I will call for thee." O rather go into thy closet, and shut the door after thee, and hold an assize in thy own breast. Ask thy heart, Am I ready for my change? Have I not indeed lived without Christ in the world? Is not my heart yet dead to God, and cold as ice to the dying of Jesus, and to his bleeding wounds? O let nothing be so weighty a matter to you as this! Let nothing be so much your desire as to get eternal life through Jesus Christ! Look up to him, and speak to that dear crucified Lamb; he will hear you, and make you feel that his death has destroyed death, and brought you from the dead to live with him in time and eternity.

But this brings me to speak of that way in which we escape the tasting of death, and that is by keeping our Saviour's word: "If a man keep my sayings, he shall never see death." To keep our Saviour's sayings is, properly, to believe them, to embrace his promises, and hold them as the most precious treasure; that when in the world the blessings of our Saviour are questioned by wicked men, you may depend upon his promises, and hold

hold fast his word ; and at the loss of all things keep it as the true sayings of God. When men, who love not our Lord Christ, speak lightly of his scriptures, do you let them be weightier to you than all the arguments of reasoning men ; and let Jesus Christ's answers to satan, in the days of his temptation, be your answer in such cases : say, " It is written." Therefore I believe, and upon this will I venture body and soul. But a child of God can say more : He has not only looked upon the writings of the prophets and apostles, as sacred and inspired ; he can say, I believe and know. For that faith whereby we keep the sayings of our Saviour has, in its own nature, the assurance and knowledge of the thing believed. " Faith is the evidence of things unseen." And our Saviour says, " If a man keep my word, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God." The Holy Ghost writes it so upon the heart, gives such an inward and comfortable confidence of the truth of it, that who-ever keeps his word, sees the glory of God, is made free, has our Saviour manifested to him, overcomes satan and the world, and gets everlasting life in his heart. All these are scriptural truths, and have had in all ages multitudes of witnesses who have suffered martyrdom, or died in faith, as good soldiers upon their beds, assured that they had already laid hold on eternal life, and escaped death. Do thou, as Mary did, lay up all the words of the Son of God in thy heart, and let them be dearer to thee than thousands of gold or silver ; a lanthorn to thy feet and a light to thy paths.

A man, who superficially views this text, may reason thus, as the Jews once did, " Is not Abraham dead ? And Moses and the prophets, are they not dead ?" Do we not see the good as well as the

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bad die? how then can it be true, that he that keeps the Lord's sayings shall not taste of death? To this I answer, it is true, Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, as well as an innumerable company of the first-born, are now departed this life, and are returned to dust, but they did not die, they are not dead, they have not tasted death. When kings, proconsuls, and persecutors, saw the exit of the martyrs, heard them sing in their flames, beheld them meet the torments with the greatest heroism and bravery, and undaunted smile at the sword, the wild beasts, or instruments of death, they could not help being amazed: and no man, no sage, no philosopher, can account for the joyful manner in which such have left the world, as well as millions of others, who in their life-time, and in their last moments, have supported the utmost trials, and held fast their confidence to the end, but by acknowledging our Saviour's promise, has been verified in them; they knew their sin, which is the sting of death, was taken away; they knew the High-Priest had absolved them, his dying had opened the happy passage for them. And thus blessed with his near presence, and persuaded of his everlasting love, they have panted to be gone; and rather than start at the approach of death, they have looked upon him as a messenger sent to tell them, "the Master calleth for you;" and have thought, like the mother of Sisera, "Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the wheels of his chariot?"

But there is one thing here which I must observe, and what seems to contradict all which have been said relating to that part of the text, "He shall not see death." And this is too in one of the sayings of the same blessed apostle and Doctor of our

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profession, Christ Jesus. After he had so often said, a believer shall not die, and wisely had called their departure out of the body, a sleep, a being returned to God, &c. he saith to John in the Revelations, " I have been dead :" But here is opened an adorable mystery indeed, he says, we shall not die, we shall not so much as taste death ; but he says, " I am he which liveth and was dead ;" as if he would say, I have drunk up your curse, I have felt the sting of death, and him that had the power of it, that is, the devil. I have tasted the bitterness of death, and gone through the dark valley of the shadow of death. I have experienced what death is. I have died in the strictest sense ; the pangs of death compassed me about ; the pains of hell gat hold upon me. I have endured the sharpness of death, when I opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers. A man must have thought very carelessly on the account of our Saviour's death, if he has not observed with what anguish he sunk down, with what shocking cries he poured out his soul, and especially when he uttered that amazing prayer, which makes even every drop of blood in one's veins tremble with awe when it is repeated ! " My God ! my God ! why hast thou forsaken me !" What must his dear heart have felt ! What a cloud covered his soul ! How properly did he taste death for every man, when he roared thus for the very disquietness of his heart ! If at no other time, it may properly be said now, " He descended into hell." Then the same curse and death which a lost soul feels, our God and Lord felt ; and the same misery, distress and vengeance which we had merited, burst upon him, and drank up his spirits ; and thus, in the strictest sense, he has died for us. He has been dead to save his poor sheep from so great a plague ; and

has by this means deserved the living and dead, and merited that blessed character, "The good Shepherd, who laid down his life for the Sheep."

However, the doctrine of our Saviour's so painful dying should melt the hardest heart, and make the most light-minded and trifling soul adore him with eyes overflowing with tears; yet, we see, it has had quite a contrary effect on many men, whose false wisdom have made them fools; or some have concluded from all this, that our Saviour was a mere man; and either like the Jews, thought he suffered justly; or, like Arians, dreamed he died only to shew us a good pattern, and was only a martyr for his doctrine. Far be such cursed thoughts from our hearts! He is certainly God over all: "He live and was dead, and is the Almighty, whose goings-forth have been of old, even from everlasting." And it is his being the eternal God, which has made his sufferings so meritorious and dear; "and hereby we perceive the love of God, because he laid down his life for us." When a certain deist, who read diligently how Jesus expired, and observed how his martyrs, in many ages, laid down their lives, and the Head dying with so much trembling and horror, and the disciples with so much courage, he blasphemously confessed, he could sooner trust the blood of one of the martyrs than the blood of Jesus Christ; for, said he, these did like men, and behaved courageously, and as heroes, but he died as a fool dieth, and behaved as if abandoned and forsaken, and like one in despair, and worse, so he ended his life. This has somewhat in it of truth, for he truly died in this frightful manner, with horrid groans and cries, while the martyrs and all true christians have gone unconcerned, or rather rejoicing to the stake, sung in their fires,

fires, leaped for joy at the place of execution, or departed in peace and assurance upon their beds: But the reason of this strange difference is this, Jesus died, bearing the sins of the world, the wrath of God, the rage and malice of satan; and for every man tasted death, loaded with our transgressions, and afflicted and accursed with all our iniquities and chastisement, as it is written, "he was made a curse for us." But, on the other hand, the martyrs and witnesses of Christ have had no such burden to bear, no death to taste, no hell or satan to be afraid of; and the feelings and knowledge of this, by the Holy Ghost, led them triumphantly through all torments and trials; and because their hearts experienced what the bitter death of their dear Master and Lord had effected upon them, they followed the Captain of their salvation through sufferings, and sung to him, "thou hast loved us, and saved us from our sins by thy blood." This gave the first witness such boldness, that when they were casting stones at him, without mercy, he saw by faith the heavens opened, and fell asleep, calling upon the Saviour, saying, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit!" This was no other than after the Hero had slain the enemy, his children could put their feet upon his neck and sing; or when one had robbed a serpent or dragon of his poison and sting, others come and handle it fearlessly; so the children and servants of God glory over death, and ask, "O death where is thy sting! O grave, where is thy victory!" but must bless that Lord who waded through, and made war and overcame, namely, he who gives them their victory, even our Lord Jesus Christ.

So that, properly, all our happiness, boldness, joy, comfort and assurance, is owing entirely and solely

solely to the bitter and painful death of our Lord, God and Saviour upon the cross. This every true child of God is well convinced of; he knows what a miserable estate he was once in, and shunned death as a lioness robbed of her whelps. He cannot forget with what an aching heart his eyes were open to his own lost and corrupted estate, till the Holy Spirit directed him to Christ crucified; the very believing he died for him, and suffering that hell in his stead, eased his heart, and in the sweet streams of his blood, he got pardon, and an ease from all his pains and fears: So that with greatest certainty he can thank our Saviour for his bloody death; and rejoicing say, with David, I shall not die but live; or with St. Paul, "The life which I now live, is the life of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

This is also the reason why now we in the christian church, in all our hymns and songs, mention only, and above all things, "The Lamb that was slain;" and like as Moses, David, Deborah, and others, taught the children of Israel to sing of their salvation from Egypt, Philistines, Assyrians, &c. and tell of it in their songs from one generation to another; so we, who have been redeemed by the blood and death of the Lamb of God, esteem his merits and sufferings alone worthy to be sung in all places, and believe all other deliverance were but shadows of this.

We behave as witnesses of his death and victory, and sing of his reproach and shame, his wounds and bonds, his cruel mocking and scourging, meekly suffering our chastisement and charges of our sin; and while others deride and disesteem him in his affliction, weakness and meanness, and salute him in scorn, we look upon him with the greatest reverence

rence and thankfulness, and think, how glorious did the King of Israel look ! how red in his apparel ! how beautiful in that form which was marred more than any man's, with the crown of thorns upon his head, the crown wherewith he was crowned in the day of his espousals ! How brave, when he would not yield, but endured the cross, waded through hell, was stung to death by the king of terrors ; and who, amidst all his torments and countless trials and sufferings, weathered out the storm, and having loved his own, loved them to the end, and put it beyond the power of pain, or death, or hell, or eternal wrath, to separate us from him. We sing how at last satan gave out, and his death abolished death, and the smoke of his torment ascending up and made an eternal atonement before the throne ; from that moment the Captain of our salvation said, " It is finished," began in heaven the new song which we repeat with joyful hearts on earth, " Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive blessing and glory for ever ; for he has saved our souls from death, our eyes from tears, and our feet from falling ;" and hence we know, " we shall never die, death shall have no dominion over us."

These are the benefits of believing in Christ, and these are the common privileges of all the faithful in every land. Let these be then the mark of the prize of your high calling, nor account yourselves christians indeed, till you have received from heaven the blessed and comfortable knowledge, that you shall not die eternally ; nor even, when you departing this mortal and troublesome life, taste that death which for your sakes Jesus Christ in our flesh has suffered for us. Do not let unbelief hinder you to see it your privilege, or keep you back from entering the possession of so valuable and divine a treasure,

sure, or check your most earnest prayers to him, who has the keys of hell and death, to grant it to you. He is God, and can save you; he is loving, and will do it; he is the very refuge and sanctuary for such as are ready to perish, and whose whole bleeding form preaches his grace. His head is bowed down to kiss you, his arms extended to embrace you, his wounds open, that, like a dove, you may turn in and dwell in those clefts of the rock and be safe. Arise, ye dear people, go into his wounds, live in his death, and go no more out. Search the scriptures with greater diligence than ever, and hold fast the blessed words of the Son of God. Believe then with all your hearts, and that blessing shall come upon you which is sent to the churches in the Revelations, "Because thou hast kept my word, I will keep thee." Let the sayings of Jesus be laid up in your hearts, and you shall be witnesses that "he who keeps his sayings shall not see death."

Now to Him that lives and was dead, and is alive again for evermore, even to Jesus the Son of God, be glory, to his Father, and the Holy Ghost, for ever and ever. Amen.

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